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THE DESERET ALPHABET

S. S. IVINS

In the 1932 Salt Lake City directory were more than twenty-five listings beginning with the word "Deseret." They included two banks, a cigar stand, an employment bureau, and a potato chip company.

This word first appeared in the literature of the Mormons in their earliest publication, the *Book of Mormon*. That book told the story of a small group of refugees from the Tower of Babel, setting out in search of a new home. Among the things they took along, "they did also carry with them deseret, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee. . . ."¹

The new word came into common use among the Mormons soon after they had settled in the Salt Lake Valley. Choosing the honey bee as their symbol of industry, they set up a provisional government which they named the State of Deseret. When they were granted a territorial government, unsympathetic officials in Washington denied them their chosen name. But to them, Utah was still their "lovely Deseret," and when they decided to introduce a new system of orthography, they called it the Deseret Alphabet.

It is not clear in whose mind the plan for a new alphabet was conceived. Jules Remy, who visited Salt Lake City in the summer of 1855, said of the experiment, "To give every man his due, we ought to say that the idea originated with the apostle W. W. Phelps, one of the regents of the University, and that it was he who worked out the letters."² Many years later, F. D. Richards, one of the official Mormon historians, wrote to H. H. Bancroft that the alphabet "was a favorite project of Brigham Young."³ Whether or not the project originated in the mind of Brigham Young, it is certain that he became its principal sponsor.

¹*Book of Mormon*, Ether 2:3

²Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to Great-Salt-Lake City* (London, 1861), II, 185.

³Manuscript letter in the Bancroft Library at the University of California.

Whoever was responsible for the new alphabet, the idea of a language reform was perhaps a logical expression of some of the religious convictions of the early Mormons. They believed that they were the instruments to be used by the Lord in bringing about world-wide religious, social, and political changes in preparation for the establishment of the kingdom of God upon the earth. In the course of this readjustment, there was to be a restoration of the biblical "ancient order of things," including the pure universal language in use prior to the confusion of tongues.

Brigham Young told how he once "spoke in tongues" before an early gathering of Mormons and was assured by the prophet Joseph Smith that he had spoken in "the pure Adamic language."⁴ And Apostle Orson Pratt, speaking of the imperfections of the English language, said, "Will there be a pure language restored? There will; through the testimony of the prophets. We are also told that tongues will cease. We are to understand by this that the great varieties of languages and tongues that have existed on the earth for many ages, are to be done away; they are to cease; now something must take the place of those imperfect, confused languages and tongues. What is that something? It is a language that is spoken by higher orders of beings than ourselves; that is, beings that have progressed further than ourselves; it is that same language that was spoken for nearly two thousand years after the creation; that was spoken by Adam and by his children Whether this pure language here spoken of, which is to be spoken here upon the earth among mankind in their mortal state, is to be as perfect as the language that has to be spoken in our immortal state, is not for us to say"⁵

The suggestion of a reform in language came when the Mormons had been only a few years in Utah. On April 8, 1853, Brigham Young sat in the "Old Tabernacle" in Salt Lake City, listening to a lecture on education being delivered by Orson Spencer, Chancellor of the newly created University of Deseret. The speaker was evidently talking over the heads of most of his listeners, and when he had concluded his remarks, Young followed with a discourse in which he spoke at length of the senseless complexities of the

⁴*Millennial Star*, XXIV (Liverpool, 1863), 439.

⁵*Journal of Discourses*, III, 110.

English language. He said that, while he considered it to be as good a language as any in use,

When we scan it narrowly, we find it to be fraught with imperfections and ridiculous vagaries. . . . Brother Spencer has used language quite beyond your reach. Well, I have the foundation, and he can make the building. When he commences the building, I have asked the Board of Regents to cast out from their system of education, the present orthography and written form of our language, that when my children are taught the graphic sign for A, it may always represent that individual sound only. But as it now is, the child is perplexed that the sign A should have one sound in *mate*, a second sound in *father*, a third sound in *fall*, a fourth sound in *man*, and a fifth sound in *many*, and in other combinations, soundings different from these, while, in others, A is not sounded at all. I say let it have one sound all the time. And when P is introduced into a word, let it not be silent as in *Phthisic*, or sound like F in *Physic*, and let two not be placed instead of one in apple. . . .

. . . . If there were one set of words to convey one set of ideas, it would put an end to the ambiguity which often mystifies the ideas given in the languages now spoken. Then when a great man delivered a learned lecture upon any subject, we could understand his words If I can speak so that you can get my meaning, I care not so much what words I use to convey that meaning.

I long for the time that a point of the finger, or motion of the hand, will express every idea without utterance. When a man is full of light of eternity, then the eye is not the only medium through which he sees, his ear is not the only means by which he understands I shall yet see the time that I can converse with this people, and not speak to them, but the expression of my countenance will tell the congregation what I wish to convey, without opening my mouth.⁶

A year and a half later, steps were taken to begin a reformation in the written language. In October 1853, the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret appointed a committee of three to work out a system of orthography and prepare a schoolbook in the new characters. The committee included Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, and George D. Watt.⁷ Watt was a "phonographer" who for many years reported the sermons of the leading church dignitaries and published them in a periodical which he called the *Journal of Discourses*. Pratt was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and one of the most prolific writers pro-

⁶*Journal of Discourses*, I, 69-71.

⁷H. H. Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco, 1890), p. 712.

duced by Mormonism. Kimball was First Counselor to Brigham Young in the Presidency of the Church.

The *Deseret News* of November 24, 1853, reported that the Board of Regents, in cooperation with the Presidency of the Church, had been discussing the question of a reformed alphabet. It said:

Now in the present stage of the discussion it is proposed by some to change a small portion of the English alphabetical characters and attach invariable certainty to the sounds of others. . . . Others are for carrying the reformation still further, thinking that a people of progressive intellect will not be content with only a partial reformation, and that it requires an entirely new set of alphabetical characters to effect a clean, handsome reformation that will be abiding. All seem to be agreed that both the written and printed language should be one and the same.

In the same issue of the *News* was a letter from a reform enthusiast who signed himself "Urs Go A. Hed." He asked: "Kant we tawk with awl the nashuns?"

The following December, Brigham Young, in his Governor's message to the territorial legislature, called attention to the need of a simplified language, and said that the "Regency" was working on the problem. He did not ask for legislation in the matter.⁸

At a December 26th meeting in the Salt Lake City 14th Ward, Parley P. Pratt reported that the "Regency are getting out a new alphabet, and when we learn our letters ourselves, we will teach others."⁹

On January 19, 1854, the *Deseret News* announced: "The Board of Regents, in company with the Governor and heads of the departments, have adopted a new alphabet consisting of thirty-eight characters." It added that the Board, despairing of simplifying "the English language," had decided "to invent an entirely new and original set of characters," which would probably soon be given to the schools.

These characters are much more simple in their structure than the usual alphabetical characters; every superfluous mark supposable is wholly excluded from them. The written and printed hand are substantially merged into one.

We may derive a hint of the advantage to orthography from spelling the word "eight" which in the new alphabet requires only two letters instead of five, to spell it, viz "AT." There

⁸*Deseret News*, December 15, 1853.

⁹*Deseret News*, January 12, 1854.

will be great saving of time and paper by the use of the new characters, and but a very small part of the time and expense will be requisite in obtaining a knowledge of the language.

The orthography will be so abridged that an ordinary writer can probably write one hundred words a minute with ease, and consequently report the speech of a common speaker without much difficulty.

As soon as this alphabet can be set in type, it will probably be furnished to the schools of the territory for their use and benefit, not, however, with a view to immediately supercede the use of the common alphabet which though it does not make the comers thereunto perfect, still it is a vehicle that has become venerable for age and much hard service.

In the new alphabet every letter has a fixed and unalterable sound. By this method strangers cannot only acquire a knowledge of our language much more readily but a practiced reporter can also report a strange language when spoken. . . .

Just who had "invented" the new alphabet is not clear. Jules Remy wrote that W. W. Phelps "worked out the letters."¹⁰ But T. W. Ellerbeck, who worked in Brigham Young's office while the alphabet was in use there, said that the characters were "designed principally by George D. Watt," who had drawn part of them himself and selected others "from some of the ancient alphabets" found in Webster's dictionary.¹¹ And, according to Andrew Jenson, an assistant Church historian, they were "constructed" by "a committee composed of Orson Pratt, Parley P. Pratt, Wilford Woodruff, George D. Watt, Robert L. Campbell, and others."

With the new alphabet adopted, its sponsors took steps to promote its use. The First Presidency of the Church recommended it to the Saints and said that they desired "that all of our teachers and instructors will introduce it in their schools, and to their classes. The orthography of the English language needs reforming—a word to the wise is sufficient."¹²

George D. Watt and Albert Carrington lectured on the alphabet in Social Hall, and Watt began "organizing [six] schools in the different wards of the city."¹³

Regents of the University were assigned to visit each school district in Salt Lake City and to "enjoin it upon

¹⁰Remy and Brenchley, p. 185.

¹¹*Deseret News*, September 13, 1930.

¹²*Millennial Star*, XVI (1854), 419.

¹³Letter of George A. Smith to F. D. Richards in the *Millennial Star*, XVI, 584.

the Trustees and Board of Examination to make it an indispensable requisite in teachers to forthwith qualify themselves to teach the Deseret Alphabet in their respective schools.¹⁴

In his December 1854 message to the Legislature, Governor Young recommended that the alphabet "be thoroughly and extensively taught in all the schools, combining, as it eminently does, a basis of instruction for the attainment of the English language, far surpassing in simplicity and ease any known to exist."¹⁵

Elder B. B. Messenger taught the alphabet to the clerks in the Church Historian's Office.¹⁶ And John B. Milner specialized in teaching it in Utah County, where he had "considerable success, having sixty scholars at Lehi, twenty-eight at American Fork, twenty-five at Mountainville, twenty-eight at Pleasant Grove, twenty-two at Provo First Ward, who are making good progress."¹⁷

At a meeting of the Deseret Typographical Association, (August 2, 1855), George D. Watt, of the "Committee on the Deseret Alphabet," presented three resolutions, which were unanimously adopted. The first hailed the new alphabet, "as a forerunner in that series of developments in philology which shall prepare mankind for the reception of a pure language." The second declared the intent of the association to work "towards rendering universal in our midst the practical adoption of this New Alphabet." The third solicited the services of Elder Watt for the instruction of the members in the alphabet. Watt announced that his first lesson would be given on August 9th, at 6 p.m.¹⁸

The attempt to promote the use of the alphabet in the schools did not meet with much success. It could not be enforced because there was no tax-supported school system. And the teachers in the private schools showed little interest.

When Jules Remy visited Salt Lake City in the summer of 1855, a year and a half had passed since the official adoption of the alphabet. He wrote that at that time, "nothing has been published, as far as we know, with these singular

¹⁴*Deseret News*, December 7, 1854.

¹⁵*Millennial Star*, XVII (1855), 262.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁷George A. Smith in the *Deseret News*, March 21, 1855.

¹⁸*Deseret News*, August 15, 1855.

types. We have known them used in private correspondence, and seen them on shop signs." He predicted that the innovation would be "abandoned by its own authors." He reproduced an engraving of "a facsimile of the Mormon alphabet, which we had executed at San Francisco, in January, 1856, after some genuine specimens we brought from the Salt Lake." This was, perhaps, the first engraving of the alphabet to be made. It showed forty characters, each representing a single sound. Most of them appeared to be of original design, but about half a dozen could have been copied from the Greek and Arabic.¹⁹

In December, 1855, Brigham Young wrote to F. D. Richards, who was presiding over the Mormon missionary work in Great Britain:

We contemplate having a set of school books printed at the Liverpool Office, in the new alphabet; we would like to have you inform us in relation to getting up a font of type, and whether we will have to send any person to Liverpool for that purpose, or to oversee the printing of the books, the manuscript of course being furnished from this Territory.

It is our intention to introduce this system in the schools throughout the Territory. . . . The Legislation Assembly will probably take this matter in hand and make an appropriation to further this object.²⁰

The legislature did take the matter in hand and appropriated the sum of \$2,500.00 to be "expended under the direction and control of the Chancellor and Board of Regents in procuring fonts of Deseret Alphabet type, in paying for printing books with said type, and for other purposes."²¹

With the needed funds appropriated, the Board of Regents proceeded with plans to have school books printed. At its February 4, 1856, meeting, with the Presidency of the Church sitting in, "Elders W. Woodruff and S. W. Richards, Regents, and Elder George D. Watt, Secretary of the Board, were appointed a committee to prepare and arrange the matter" for the books.²²

The Board of Regents met again on February 11th, and acting on the suggestion of President Young, added D. H.

¹⁹Remy and Brenchley, II, 185.

²⁰*Millennial Star*, XVIII (1856), 331.

²¹Acts, Resolutions, etc., of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah—1851 to 1870 inclusive, p. 110. See also Andrew Love Neff, *History of Utah, 1847 to 1869* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1940), p. 851.

²²*Deseret News*, February 6, 1856.

Wells, A. Carrington, and W. Willes to the committee on school books.²³

At the February 25th meeting of the Board, Chairman Wilford Woodruff told of the progress of his committee on preparing matter for school books. He "reported quite an amount in readiness for revision preparatory to being copied." But since the "committee on revision" had been too busy to pass on much of the manuscript presented, three new members were added to it. They were Elias Smith, Orson Pratt, and Parley P. Pratt. Also at this meeting, the pronunciation and spelling of "several classes of words, where custom invariably differs from that found in Webster's dictionary, was unanimously decided upon, and a record thereof made by the secretary."²⁴

In the summer of 1856, the *Deseret News* began advertising for sale cards with the "latest revision" of the Deseret Alphabet printed on them. The cards sold for ten cents each, twenty-five cents for three, and seventy-five cents per dozen.²⁵

But progress in getting out the school books was slow. Nearly sixteen months after the appointment of the committee on books, Erastus Snow was in St. Louis trying to secure type needed for the printing.²⁶ While he was there it was learned that a new governor, appointed in the place of Brigham Young, was on his way to Utah, escorted by a detachment of 2,500 United States troops. The Mormons offered a token resistance to this "invasion" and the "Utah War" followed. It was not until the fall of 1858 that this difficulty was adjusted and the Saints returned to their normal life.

During the "War," the new alphabet was apparently forgotten. But with peace restored, interest in it was revived. Under date of November 20, 1858, the L. D. S. Journal History says:

At four o'clock p.m. Wilford Woodruff called on President Young, and conversed with him in regard to the Deseret Alphabet. The works that we formerly compiled are all lost. The President wished Wilford Woodruff to take hold with George D. Watt and get up some more.

²³*Ibid.*, February 11, 1856.

²⁴*Deseret News*, February 27, 1846.

²⁵*Ibid.*, July 2, 1856.

²⁶See May 29, 1857, letter of Brigham Young to H. S. Eldredge, in Utah State Historical Society Library.

Early in the following year the *Deseret News* formally introduced the alphabet to its readers. In the issue of February 16, 1859, it ran a cut of the characters, together with an extract from the Gospel of St. Matthew, printed in the strange writing. The alphabet, as presented by the *News*, was not identical with the engraving published by Jules Remy. A half dozen of the symbols had been altered and those representing the "or" and "U" sounds were missing, leaving thirty-eight characters.

The *News* was not enthusiastic about the new alphabet. It said, "We present to the people the Deseret Alphabet, but we have not adopted any rules to bind the taste, judgment, or preference of any. Such as it is you have it." However, it added hopefully, that the more the new system was studied, the more useful it would appear.

Brief articles in the characters continued in the *News* for more than a year; then, in May, 1860, they were discontinued without comment. Four years later, in May, 1864, they reappeared, but ran for only six months.

The alphabet was used to a limited extent in the Church Historian's Office and in keeping Brigham Young's ledger, but aside from this, the reform movement came to a standstill. The plan to publish school books appears to have been forgotten. Of this lapse of interest in the project, F. D. Richards wrote, "Then, other matters demanding attention, the Deseret Alphabet went out of use by a kind of tacit neglect, or by general distaste for it."²⁷

But, while the new alphabet had apparently been abandoned, the idea of a reform in writing persisted. In April, 1867, Edward L. Sloan sent a letter to the *Deseret News*, calling a meeting of those interested in organizing a phonographic society to "adopt a uniform system of phonography," so that "all may write alike." He offered to train instructors who could teach the new system in the schools.²⁸

This renewed interest in phonetics must have aroused the friends of the Deseret Alphabet, for, at the October Conference of the Church, Brigham Young and George A. Smith urged the Saints to resume their study of it.²⁹

The attempt of President Young to revive his pet project appeared at first to have failed. The *News* of December

²⁷Letter to H. H. Bancroft in Bancroft Library.

²⁸*Deseret News*, April 24, 1867.

²⁹*Ibid.*, October 9, 1867.

19th reported that at a meeting of the Board of Regents, held the previous evening, "it was unanimously resolved to adopt the phonetic characters employed by Ben Pitman of Cincinnati, for printing purposes" And the next day the paper carried a somewhat sad farewell to the discarded alphabet. It explained that the question of reform in spelling had

rested with great weight upon the mind of President Young, and his interest in it has never flagged. Under his direction, years ago, characters were adopted, notices for them were imported and a quantity of type was cast. But, whether from ignorance or design, the matrices were very rudely made, and did the characters great injustice.

This error had "kept the proposal in obedience." It had now been decided by the Chancellor and Board of Regents,

President Young meeting with them, and taking great interest in the discussion to adopt the Pitman Phonetic alphabet and recommend it to the people for their adoption . . . Pitman's characters are available. This is the reason for their selection, and not because they were thought to be the best characters for an alphabet

But, although its obituary had been written, the alphabet would not die. On the evening of February 3, 1868,

a full board of Regents met in President Young's office, and discussed the best form of characters to be used for a phonetic alphabet. A reconsideration of the Pitman Alphabet drew forth a universal expression in favor of our characters, known as the Deseret Alphabet, as being better adapted; and a motion was made to take the necessary measures to introduce it in printed works.³⁰

The following May 15th, the Board of Regents again met in President Young's office, and voted to have Professor Orson Pratt, "as soon as possible, furnish matter for elementary works to be printed in the Deseret Alphabet."³¹ Professor Pratt soon finished his assignment, and D. O. Calder was sent to "the States" to arrange for the casting of type and the publication of school books. The *Deseret News* of August 13th reported that

he has sent on a specimen copy of the primer he has got out. It contains thirty-six pages printed in the new alphabet. The characters, to a person unaccustomed to them, may look strange, but to the eye with which they are familiar, they are beautiful. Their chief beauty is their simplicity.

³⁰*Deseret News*, February 4, 1868.

³¹*Ibid.*, May 16, 1868.

The *News* added that, while the plan to accomplish such a radical reform might be quixotic in an ordinary community, "our position is unique. We are united. This system can be made universal among us with but little trouble."

At the October Conference, Brigham Young announced that there were "many thousands of small books, called the first and second readers" on their way to Utah to be distributed. He asked that the books be introduced into the schools.⁸²

The school books arrived. The "Furst Book" contained thirty-six pages of printed matter, and the "Sekund Book" seventy-two pages. With one exception, the characters in the primers were the same as those used by the *Deseret News* ten years earlier. The sign for the long "A" sound had been reversed.

At the meeting of the Board of Regents on October 30, 1868, it was reported that ten thousand copies of each of the primers had been received,

and now require to be distributed among the scholars throughout the Territory. They are well printed, on good paper, profusely illustrated, and make the beginning of a very excellent series of elementary works. . . . Some errors have unavoidably crept in, but these will be corrected in a list of errata, and a printed sheet containing the corrections will be placed in each copy.

Orson Pratt, George D. Watt, and school superintendent R. L. Campbell were appointed to a committee to make corrections, "fix the prices of the books, and dispose of them to the schools in behalf of the Board of Regents."⁸³ The first book was offered for sale at fifteen cents and the second at twenty cents.

Once the primers were in circulation, attention turned to the publication of other books in the alphabet. Orson Pratt reported to the March 1, 1869, meeting of the Board of Regents, that "after four months' continuous labor, he had completed the translation of the Book of Mormon" into the Deseret characters. Superintendent R. L. Campbell was appointed to assist him "in the revision of the work, with a view to its speedy publication."⁸⁴

George A. Smith told the April General Conference that the *Book of Mormon* manuscript was ready for publica-

⁸²*Journal of Discourses*, XII, 297.

⁸³*Deseret News*, October 31, 1868.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, March 2, 1869.

tion, and it was "designed to publish an edition of ten thousand copies, suitable for the use of the schools."³⁵

A few days later, a meeting of the Chancellor and Board of Regents, held in the office of President Young, authorized Orson Pratt to go to New York to superintend the publishing of the *Book of Mormon*. It was "intended to publish the Book in one volume for family use, and also to publish it in three parts for use in the schools in the Territory, the whole forming too cumbrous a volume for class use." Pratt told the Board that he expected, within a few weeks, to have a translation of the *Book of Doctrine and Covenants* completed.³⁶

Professor Pratt left for New York, and in June wrote to Superintendent Campbell that he was forwarding

two copies of the first six pages of the book, in which, by a fifth reading, I discover but one letter wrong. This, I believe, is much more accurate than the generality of books, printed in the old orthography. The large capitals are not yet finished but will, when done, be stereotyped, and inserted in their appropriate places in the work. . . . The compositors make a great abundance of mistakes in setting the type, which greatly increases my labor in the corrections."³⁷

The *News* of September 28th reported that the publication of the new version of the *Book of Mormon* had been accomplished, and hailed the event as "the greatest stride yet made in the world towards phonetic reform." In December, Superintendent Campbell placed the books on sale at the Historian's Office. Prices were two dollars for the *Book of Mormon*, and seventy-five cents for "Part First (containing 116 pages) designed for a Third Reader," with a "Heavy discount to Wholesale Purchasers." Both books were "Published For The Deseret University By Russell Bros." The full *Book of Mormon* contained 443 pages, indicating that the use of the new characters resulted in a saving of about twenty per cent in printing space.

In the meantime, the task of getting the Deseret primers into the schools was being pushed. Late in 1868, School Superintendent Campbell and Edward Stevenson made a three weeks' tour of the southern counties, holding

³⁵*Ibid.*, April 8, 1869.

³⁶*Ibid.*, April 14, 1869.

³⁷*Ibid.*, June 19, 1869.

meetings in the interest of the alphabet. The *Desert News* reported that they had a jolly time,

the incongruities and inconsistencies of the present system of orthography forming the subject of many a laughable joke, while illustrating the advantages of the Deseret system of reading and writing. The Scandinavians hail the new system with much pleasure.³⁸

Similar trips were made to other parts of the Territory.

On January 25, 1869, at a meeting of "many of the school trustees and school teachers" of Salt Lake City, apparently called by Campbell, the "introduction of the Deseret characters and readers in the schools was discussed and agreed to. . . . The teachers appointed Saturday next at 9:00 a.m. for a meeting of all the teachers of the city, who wished to attend and be instructed in Deseret orthography."³⁹ If anyone came to the Saturday meeting, the *News* did not report the fact.

Brigham Young praised the alphabet before the ladies of the 15th Ward Relief Society, and recommended its introduction into the schools, "not that the old method may be thrown away or discarded, but as a means of facilitating the progress of the children in their studies."⁴⁰ And at the General Conference in October, Apostle George A. Smith charged the bishops with the duty of disseminating "a knowledge of those characters" among the people.

The Juvenile Instructor, a periodical published for the Sunday School children, did its bit to promote the use of the alphabet. It said:

About sixteen years ago, the Chancellor and the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret, under the direction of President Young, got up a new alphabet, which was called the Deseret Alphabet. . . . There are two Readers and the Book of Mormon now printed in the Deseret Alphabet. Every child should learn to read them. They are easily learned. . . . When these readers and Books of Mormon are sold, then the Board of Regents will have money to print the Old and New Testaments; the Book of Covenants, a dictionary, and other books. . . . We hope that every Sunday School Superintendent will introduce these books into his school, so that all the children may become familiar with the system.⁴¹

³⁸*Ibid.*, December 10, 1868.

³⁹*Ibid.*, January 26, 1869.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, February 20, 1869.

⁴¹*Juvenile Instructor*, IV (1869), 180.

The *Deseret News* of December 17, 1869, carried a long editorial in defense of the experiment. It recognized the problem of introducing the alphabet into the schools before books were available. But now that there were primers and *Books of Mormon* in abundance, they "should be used in the Sunday Schools, in households, and in every schoolroom in the Territory." The *News* believed that it was only necessary to "let it be known by the people of this Territory that a new and better system should be adopted, and they will not hesitate to carry it out." A month later it prophesied that "at no distant date, the alphabet will be universally used by the people of this Territory."⁴²

Edward L. Sloan, "Phonetician and Practical Phonographer," opened a school of phonography, and offered his students free lessons in the Deseret Alphabet.⁴³

A few teachers tried to introduce the new alphabet into their schools. Someone signing himself "Nestor" wrote from Tooele that the system was being taught "in Mr. Bowen's school and we hope soon to have it in other schools."⁴⁴

And W. R. May of Nephi rebuked those teachers who "think that they cannot spare time" to teach the reformed alphabet. He said that he had "a day school, composed of eighty children in which I have introduced the Deseret Alphabet with success." He insisted that it was only necessary "to put the First and Second Readers into the children's hands and they will learn to read in them without teaching." He urged his fellow teachers to follow his example. "Do not throw cold water upon the efforts of our leaders in this respect by being dilitory in providing the books or in making light of the subject in any way. . . ."⁴⁵

One of the most promising projects for introducing the alphabet was that of W. A. McMaster. He opened a special school in Salt Lake City for "teaching phonetics, using the Deseret Alphabet. Brother W. E. Jones was elected principal teacher, with several auxiliaries. There were twenty-six pupils in attendance at the opening of the class."

But the attempt to get the alphabet into the schools met with little success, and, according to F. D. Richards, was soon abandoned because the characters were too diffi-

⁴²*Deseret News*, January 19, 1870.

⁴³*Ibid.*, January 4, 1870.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, February 25, 1869.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, January 17, 1870.

cult to read.⁴⁶ And there appears to be no evidence that it was ever included in the curricula of the University of Deseret.

Toward the end of 1870, the *Deseret News* discontinued advertising the sale of the Deseret books. And when, in November, School Superintendent Campbell wrote to the *News* to explain why the "National series" of school books had been chosen over the McGuffey and Independent Readers, he did not mention the Deseret primers.

However, nearly two years later, there were those who had hopes for the survival of the alphabet. During the summer of 1872, meetings were held in Salt Lake City for the purpose of developing uniform procedure in the Mormon Sunday Schools. George Q. Cannon, General Superintendent of Sunday Schools

suggested the wisdom of forming classes to read the *Book of Mormon* in the Deseret Alphabet, as it was the wish of President Young that a knowledge of these characters should be extended among the Saints.⁴⁷

A committee was appointed to carry out some of Cannon's suggestions, but his recommendation concerning the alphabet was not followed, and this last attempt to revive interest in the experiment was without avail.

If notice of the abandonment of the Deseret Alphabet was needed, it came in the summer of 1877, when Orson Pratt was sent to Liverpool "for the purpose of printing the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, according to the phonotype system of Pitman." He ordered the necessary "phonotype" from London, but just when "most of it had arrived in Liverpool," he was called back to Utah because of the death of Brigham Young. The plan to publish books in Pitman was dropped.

The only books published in the Deseret Alphabet were the two primers, the *Book of Mormon* complete, and "Part First" of the *Book of Mormon* containing 116 pages, and "designed for a Third Reader." There is no way of knowing how many of these books found their way into the schools or the homes of the people. They still appear frequently in second-hand book stores, and very few of them show signs of having been used. Rarely is a primer found containing the sheet with "a list of errata," which was to be placed in each book sold.

⁴⁶Letter to Bancroft.

⁴⁷*Juvenile Instructor*, VII (1872), 144.

Nor do we know much about the extent to which the alphabet was used in writing. F. D. Richards said that it was used for "about a year" in keeping Brigham Young's ledger, and "to some extent in the Historian's Office . . . during a similar period in 1859 and 1860."⁴⁸ And at the height of its popularity, a few of the more faithful Saints used it in keeping their private Journals. If it was used in correspondence, as Jules Remy suggested, little or no evidence of the fact has survived.

It was charged that the Mormons inaugurated their language reform as a scheme to maintain their isolation and to prevent "outsiders" from knowing what was happening in Utah. It does not appear that these were major objectives of the experiment, although the exclusion of Gentile scribblings was undoubtedly one of the benefits which it was hoped would be realized. T. W. Ellerbeck said that the alphabet was adopted by the University regents "with the view of enabling our youth to learn more easily to read and spell, and to hinder or prevent their access to the yellow colored literature of our age or any unwholesome reading."⁴⁹ And the *Deseret News*, discussing the purposes of the reform, declared:

The greatest evils which now flourish, and under which Christendom groans, are directly traceable to the licentiousness of the press. . . . It is our aim to check its demoralizing tendencies, and in no way can we better do this, than by making the knowledge of the Deseret Alphabet general and by training the children in its use.⁵⁰

Again, in a dissertation on "Literature and its Influence," the *News* argued that, while children who could read only the new alphabet "might labor under some disadvantages," these would not be "wholly unmixed with benefits" as long as the country was flooded with such pernicious publications as the *Police Gazette*, *Day's Doings*, and *Last Sensation*.⁵¹

Because this bold undertaking in language reform was permitted to expire so quietly, we have little contemporary comment on the reasons for its failure. Jules Remy had predicted that the alphabet would be abandoned on account of the "inconveniences to which it would give use, such as

⁴⁸Letter to Bancroft.

⁴⁹*Deseret News*, September 13, 1930.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, August 13, 1868.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, March 25, 1869.

the effacement of etymologies, and the disconnection of roots from their derivations."⁵² Bancroft, probably repeating the opinion of F. D. Richards, said that the "tailless characters, and the monotonous evenness of the lines, made the words difficult to distinguish; and it was found impossible to insure uniform pronunciation and orthography."⁵³ B. H. Roberts thought that "the limitations of the community" made the experiment "abortive."⁵⁴ And Ellerbeck wrote:

I do not think it was officially discarded but it was found in practice that the economical idea for the benefit of the enduring qualities of the type did not answer well for the eyes—the monotony of the lines of type without tops or tails made it more difficult for the eyes to follow than the old style. Busier times coming on, the characters of the Deseret Alphabet gradually disappeared.⁵⁵

Thus, twenty years after its inauguration, the Mormon plan to reform the English language came to an unlamented end. It had received the enthusiastic support of Brigham Young and other high Church officials. But the Saints, in refutation of the popular notion that they blindly followed their leaders in all things, had rejected the new alphabet, and chosen to retain the old system, with all its "imperfections and ridiculous vagaries."

⁵²Remy and Brenchley, II, 185.

⁵³Bancroft, *History of Utah*, p. 714.

⁵⁴B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1930), V, 79.

⁵⁵*Deseret News*, September 13, 1930.